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ABSTRACT

To help bridge the gap between student services and student complaints, some 30 colleges and universities are experimenting with a new concept in higher education called the ombudsman. Their objective is to defuse explosive student attitudes stemming from irritation with the institution by providing, in addition to the normal channels of assistance and redress, an independent faculty member who personally receives individual grievances and, if he believes they have merit, seeks immediate relief. To assess the effectiveness and implications of this new position, 6 campus ombudsmen were interviewed and more than 200 students who consulted an ombudsman at Michigan State University were surveyed. Both academic and nonacademic problems were brought to the ombudsman. Nearly half the students had taken their problems to others in authority first. Two out of three students said that their grievances were at least partially solved after taking them to the ombudsman, and all thought that the position should be continued. To be effective, an ombudsman must know the institution and have the respect of the faculty, students and administration. A list of 18 features that appear to be basic to the successful operation of the office is included. (AF)

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Group 30
Tuesday Morning and Afternoon, March 3

THE ROLE OF THE CAMPUS OMBUDSMAN*

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Regardless of its organizational structure, no complex institution of higher education is fully geared to handle the diversity of student problems it generates. All genuine grievances cannot be enclosed in a network of student services, no matter how carefully planned. Even when appropriate machinery exists for solving a problem, the student may not be aware of it or may regard it as unduly complicated.

Consequently, nearly every student during his academic program encounters obstacles he feels cannot be overcome with the help of existing agencies. Most are minor inconveniences which the student grudgingly endures, but some are serious and costly hindrances. In each case, the student becomes a candidate for protests against the entire "Establishment" even though he has been entangled in only one malfunctioning part. After studying campus disorders during 1968-69, Alexander Astin concluded that disruptive unrest is in part a response to a feeling that the welfare of the student is being slighted.[1] His findings make one wonder how many campus militants are former moderates whose grievances were ignored by the institution. Nevitt Sanford has predicted that colleges and universities whose authorities listen to students and adapt in reasonable ways to reasonable requests will be most likely to avoid serious disruption in the years ahead.[2]

To help bridge the gap between student services and student complaints, some thirty colleges and universities are experimenting with a new concept in higher education called the campus ombudsman. At least that many more are in various stages of establishing the position. Their objective is to defuse explosive student attitudes stemming from institutional irritations by providing, in addition to the normal channels of assistance and redress, an independent faculty member who personally receives individual student grievances and, if he believes they have merit, seeks immediate relief.

Although the application of the ombudsman idea to the academic scene is recent, a similar function has been performed in civil government for the past 161 years. Of Scandinavian origin, the position of ombudsman was first established as a parliamentary office in Sweden's constitution of 1809. Appointed by the legislative

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[1]Alexander Astin, Campus Disruption During 1968-69 (Washington: American Council on Education, 1969).

[2]Nevitt Sanford, "The College Student of 1980," in Campus 1980, ed. by Alvin Eurich (New York: Delacorte Press, 1968).

by the legislative body and responsible to it, the ombudsman's main duty was to defend and protect citizens who felt deprived of basic rights by the government.

During the nineteenth century, the Swedish ombudsman's efforts were concentrated on complaints involving the courts, police and prisons. In this century, however, civil service administration has become his prime concern. His actions have not been spectacular, and yet he has had considerable influence on the way public officials perform their duties.

In recent years the institution has spread rapidly to Finland, Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, Great Britain and Canada. In the United States, Congress has considered several proposals for federal ombudsmen. Hawaii is the first state with an ombudsman. The appointment of ombudsmen at various levels of government has been recommended by the American Assembly and the American Bar Association.

Authorities attribute the current surge of interest in the ombudsman concept to its transformation from a parliamentary check on the executive branch of government into an office which corrects defects in modern bureaucratic administration. The psychological appeal of the office rests in the individual's awareness that he is not helpless within the impersonal machinery of Big Organization. The unique feature of the idea is the ombudsman's authority to investigate and pass judgment without power to enforce his decisions. Censure is his only sanction.

The modern-day ombudsman has been defined as an independent, high-level officer in civil government who receives complaints from citizens, inquires into the matters involved and makes recommendations for suitable action. His remedial weapons are persuasion, criticism and publicity. He cannot arbitrarily reverse administrative action.[3] This description also fits the campus ombudsman except that he is an independent faculty member who receives complaints from students at a college or university.

Neither the civil ombudsman nor the campus ombudsman replaces existing functionaries. The office can be added to governmental and educational systems at low cost without changing their organizational structure.

The first attempt to adapt the ombudsman concept to higher education in North America occurred in 1965 through student initiative at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. A year later, Eastern Montana College at Billings became the first campus in the United States to experiment with an ombudsman. President Stanley Heywood appointed George Gloege, a chemistry professor, to fill the newly-created position in October of 1966. By 1969, campus ombudsmen were in action at institutions ranging from the University of California at Berkeley to Macon County Community College in Michigan.

As with any innovation in higher education, the appearance of campus ombudsmen raises many questions. Are we really witnessing an emerging role or a passing fancy? What are the functions? How do they affect the powers and duties of other offices?

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[3]The Ombudsman, Report of the Thirty-second American Assembly, October 26-29, 1967 (New York: Columbia University, undated), p. 6.

To make a preliminary assessment of the effectiveness and implications of the new position, six campus ombudsmen were interviewed and more than 200 students who consulted the ombudsman at Michigan State University were surveyed. The findings indicate that the campus ombudsman, if functioning properly, can alleviate student unrest by reducing student grievances.

The campus ombudsman's immediate objective is to help individual students resolve problems created by the institution. His long-range goal is to detect patterns of complaints and influence changes needed to prevent their recurrence. Even if he is only partially successful in pursuing these ends, he diminishes student dissatisfaction toward the institution.

This is not to say that the campus ombudsman is some sort of miracle man who solves complicated governance problems. Even when performing effectively, he does not dissolve confrontations challenging the organizational structure or policy decisions of the institution. He relieves individual student frustrations, he improves defects in administration, he corrects small injustices, but he does not put down major student rebellions. In carrying out his duties, the campus ombudsman follows the civil government concept of ombudsman, which is essentially intended to make an agreeable system of government function as designed rather than to restructure or replace it.

The wide assortment of student concerns brought to a campus ombudsman may be classified broadly as "academic" and "non-academic" although there is no clear separation. The first category includes problems involving admissions, course requirements, quality of instruction, advisement, tuition and fees and grades. In the second category are complaints concerning traffic regulations, financial aids, employment, housing, use of facilities and services and health care. Campus ombudsmen generally have been surprised by the range and complexity of student grievances brought to their door. Some problems are obviously beyond their competence, requiring the services of an attorney, psychiatrist or physician.

At Michigan State, where English Professor James Rust has served as campus ombudsman since 1967, nearly half the students surveyed had taken their problems to two or more persons in authority before turning to the ombudsman. Two out of three said the grievances they took to the ombudsman were solved, at least partially. The same proportion felt that the ombudsman helped relieve student frustration and hostility. None wanted the functions of the ombudsman discontinued, including those who felt that their problems were "not solved at all."

Knowledge of campus operations and regulations was chosen by the surveyed students as the most important trait a campus ombudsman should have. Other selected traits were understanding, effectiveness, authority and accessibility. Fewer than one in five favored a professional student personnel worker for the position. Nearly half recommended participation by faculty, administrators and students in selecting the campus ombudsman. Four out of five recommended a term of office longer than two years.

Although the campus ombudsman is independent of other administrative offices, the administrator he most nearly resembles is the dean of students or, at larger institutions, the vice president for student affairs. Since both are expected to help students solve their problems, the similarity has caused some confusion and resentment. Ombudsman Rust at Michigan State has pointed out basic differences separating the two positions. The chief student affairs officer supervises a

professional staff, has student disciplinary enforcement powers or responsibilities, and is concerned primarily with non-academic or co-curricular student matters. The campus ombudsman, on the other hand, usually works alone (except for secretarial help), has no power to discipline students, and considers both academic and non-academic student problems. Also, the ombudsman may investigate complaints concerning the student affairs office. The chief student affairs officer does not have reciprocal authority.

Crucial questions in establishing the office of campus ombudsman are these: What kind of faculty member best fits the role? How should he be selected?

It already is evident that an effective campus ombudsman may come from any academic discipline as long as he is genuinely concerned about student problems, is competent to do something about them, and is held in high regard by students and colleagues. To date, nearly all campus ombudsmen are professors well acquainted with their institutions because they have spent a considerable length of time teaching there. They view their ombudsman role as an important but temporary assignment, not as a career field. Their effectiveness rests largely on their personal prestige and persuasive abilities.

For at least three reasons, the campus ombudsman probably should not be a professional student personnel worker. Despite his preparation and abilities, a student personnel worker rarely carries as much weight as a discipline-oriented professor when it comes to confronting another professor about his involvement in a student complaint. Secondly, on many campuses the student personnel worker still is regarded by students as a defender of the "Establishment" rather than an impartial investigator working in the students' behalf. Finally, it is essential that the campus ombudsman be separate and independent from all administrative offices, including student affairs, so that he will not be reluctant to investigate complaints directed toward any of them.

The method of selection is equally important because the campus ombudsman usually is responsible to the appointing individual or group. He may be chosen by students, faculty or administrators--or any combination of those groups. If selected exclusively by one group, he will be regarded as having loyalties and obligations to that group. Consequently, his overall effectiveness will be diminished.

Each college or university seeking an ombudsman faces the difficult taks of broadly selecting a faculty member who is as independent as possible from power groups which will be involved in his investigations. Bringing in an "outside" professor is not the answer because, regardless of credentials, he lacks the trait students consider most important: knowledge of operations and regulations on their campus. Providing his salary from an outside source, such as a foundation, might make him appear more independent but would not solve the appointment-accountability problem.

Although each institution appointing a campus ombudsman can benefit from the experience of others, modifications must be made to meet local needs and conditions. Nonetheless, at least 18 features appear to be basic to the successful operation of the office. These "essentials" provide a model which may be useful to planners:

1. The organizational structure of the institution should be relatively stable, supported and trusted by most of the people within it.

2. The office of ombudsman should be equivalent in salary and prestige to that of high-level academic and administrative officers.

3. The campus ombudsman should be a tenured professor, experienced in teaching and advising at the institution, and highly regarded by students, faculty and administrators. He should have some rudimentary knowledge of the law and should be thoroughly familiar with the ombudsman concept.

4. He should be nominated by a committee representing students, faculty and administrators. His appointment should be made by the institution's governing board upon the recommendation of its chief executive officer.

5. He should be appointed for a two-year term of office, renewable by mutual agreement of the ombudsman, the nominating committee and the chief executive officer..

6. He should disseminate periodic reports of a general nature to all members of the institution. Confidential reports with recommendations also may be made to the chief executive officer, who should determine the extent of their distribution.

7. While serving as ombudsman, he should not be required to teach or perform other duties that might restrict his accessibility to students seeking his services.

8. He should have a private office separate from the main administration building, yet conveniently located for students.

9. He should be receptive to individual student grievances concerning the institution. He should decide which complaints are within his jurisdiction and competence and which of those merit his investigation.

10. He should use reasoned persuasion to redress genuine student grievances as expeditiously and equitably as possible.

11. Where a pattern of student grievances develops, he should work for a change in regulations, procedures or personnel to prevent such problems from recurring.

12.. He should not conduct investigations on his own initiative but rather in response to student complaints..

13. He should have access to all campus offices and files, except medical, psychological and government-classified records.

14. He should keep confidential written records on each case he considers.

15. When rebuffed in the course of an investigation, he should have the authority to appeal to the chief executive officer for intervention. He should use that authority with restraint.

16. He should have no power to invoke disciplinary action, arbitrarily reverse decisions made by others in authority, or circumvent regulations. His power should lie in his prestige, persuasiveness and persistence in stating his views to persons involved in a grievance and, if necessary, to their organizational superiors.

17. He should supplement, not supercede, other means of redress for student grievances, such as judicial bodies and review boards.

18. Decisions regarding the continuation of the office should be based on systematic sampling of students who have consulted the ombudsman.

Although the campus ombudsman can influence improvements in institutional policies and procedures, much of his daily activity is painstaking case work bearing results that are long-term and cumulative, and therefore difficult to assess. He seems to function best where he has a specific mandate, vague guidelines and broad support.

Since the testing period for the campus ombudsman has just begun, his place or permanence in the organizational structure of the college or university is not yet fully established. As with most ideas borrowed from government by higher education, the ombudsman concept will undergo alterations to make it more acceptable in an academic setting. But whatever changes may occur in the position, the concept is not likely to be discarded since the conditions which brought the campus ombudsman into existence in the sixties will remain and perhaps intensify in the seventies.